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Archaic Egyptian Cosmology

el-Sayed el-Aswad

Abstract. – This paper is an anthropological reading of mythical and historical texts aimed at exploring the dynamics by which archaic Egyptian cosmology was constructed and reconstructed. Using Dumont's ideas of hierarchy and Sahlins' work on cultural reproduction, the study presents a synchronic and diachronic analysis of the underlying themes and principles upon which archaic Egyptian cosmology was constructed. The opposition of visible/invisible is the common principle around which other principles or sets of oppositions are clustered. The study shows that archaic Egyptian cosmology underwent a transformation from a structure based on natural entities into socially significant cosmological system. The paper further elaborates the striking homology between the archaic social cosmology represented in Osirian mythology and Christianity in the early centuries of the Christian era. [*Middle East, Egypt, cosmology, folklore, symbolic anthropology*]

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Anthropological and historical studies of archaic cosmologies of ancient societies are still in an early phase of development. This paper is an anthropological construct of Egyptian archaic cosmology embodied in two dominant mythologies. One myth concerns the god Ra, representing natural or solar cosmology, the other is related to Osiris, representing social cosmology. The research aims to elicit the underlying structure of cosmology which lies behind the appearances. For example, the natural or solar cosmology implies common principles which render the components of the universe comprehensible regardless of their multiple and superficial appearances. In addition, the study contributes to cross-cultural studies through dealing with comparative cosmology. It compares Egyptian cosmologies diachronically and synchronically with each other. The paper further compares Osirian cosmology with Christian cosmology focusing on the striking similarity

and homology between the underlying principles upon which both cosmologies are built.

Understanding a cosmological system can be achieved through concentrating on symbols and images embodied in the mythical and religious system to which that cosmological system belongs.¹ A change in the symbolic structure of the mythico-religious system results in a change or reconstruction of the whole cosmological belief system. Mythical and religious phenomena are dealt with here in their cultural context. As Geertz (1973: 125) states, the anthropological study of religion is a "two-stage operation: first, an analysis of the system of meanings embodied in the symbols which make up the religion proper, and, second, the relating of these systems to social-structural and psychological processes." Symbols and images concentrate meanings in sensible forms. This feature is profoundly important in the study of myth, art, and religion which are viewed to fix meaning without making it explicit (Hasenmueller 1989: 276).

One of the basic aims of historical-symbolic anthropology is to understand how a culture or system is reordered, or how the reproduction of

¹ Symbols and images or iconic signs belong to Peirce's triplicate classification of sign. The relationship between a symbol and that which it signifies is based on convention, habit, or law (Peirce 1958: 391). There is not a necessary or intrinsic relationship between such a symbol or word as "house" and the material building in which people reside or between the statue of liberty and the value of freedom. On the other hand, the relation of image or icon with that it signifies depends on similarity. A diagram, picture, or map is an example of an icon in the sense that it is typically similar to the real object it represents. The third kind of signs is "index" which signifies an object because it is identical to, or internally related to it (Peirce 1958: 391). Smoke and clouds are indices referring respectively to fire and rain. Images or iconic signs escape the arbitrariness that characterizes symbols as being similar to or like their referents (Hasenmueller 1984: 343).

a structure becomes its transformation (Sahlins 1981: 8).²

This paper applies Dumont's ideas of hierarchy and encompassment along with concepts of markedness and unmarkedness used in linguistic and semiotic studies (Dumont 1986). The importance of these notions and concepts in articulating structures has been recognized by scholars only in the last decade.³ Dumont's notion of hierarchical asymmetric opposition, distinguished from Lévi-Strauss' idea of binary symmetric opposition (1963) is utilized in the structural analysis. Two terms or opposites are equal in the binary opposition while they are unequal in the hierarchical opposition which necessitates the attachment of a value to one of two opposites.

Hierarchical opposition is diachronic and contains a double relation of identity and contrariety. First, there is a distinction within identity and second, there is an encompassment of the contrary (Dumont 1986: 227). In this hierarchical or marked relationship, an opposition between a whole and a part of that whole exists. The diachronic feature of the hierarchical structure can be shown by Dumont's example of Adam and Eve. As an encompassing whole Adam exists alone. Then, Eve has been created from a rib (or part) taken from Adam's body. Adam and Eve compose a set of opposition in which Adam encompasses Eve (Dumont 1986: 253). Structure, then, "is processual: a dynamic development of the cultural categories and their relationships amounting to a world system of generation and regeneration" (Sahlins 1985: 77).

Applying linguistic ideas of markedness and unmarkedness and Dumont's notion of encompassment, Lyle (1995: 171 f., 178 f.) states that the old-world cosmological structure rests on three axes of polarity: heat/cold, light/darkness, and dryness/wetness. The common ground of these oppositions, Lyle maintains, is the polarity of brightness/dullness. This study finds Lyle's statement of the three sets of oppositions to be applicable to some significant aspects of archaic Egyptian cosmology. However, one should mention that although

the polarity of brightness/darkness is remarkably of great interest to Egyptian material it does not constitute the common ground of the aforementioned sets of opposites. This paper suggests that for Egyptian material the opposition visible/invisible is the fundamental principle upon which old or archaic Egyptian cosmology was constructed. In previous studies (el-Aswad 1987, 1988, 1993, 1994a, 1994b), the author concludes that the opposition between the visible and the invisible is the underlying principle of the cosmological belief system of contemporary Egyptian peasants.

Archaic Egyptian cosmology is basically concerned with two intermingled and inseparable themes associated with two dominant and overarching sovereigns. One theme deals with natural cosmology or cosmogony as associated with the sun god Ra, while the other concerns social cosmology that treats social and political relationships as well as the dilemma of life and death closely connected to the slain god Osiris. These two interconnected forms of natural and social cosmologies indicate a significant development of ancient Egyptians' thought and worldviews.

Natural Cosmology: The Creation of the Universe

At the beginning, according to the Heliopolitan cosmology based on the earliest Egyptian mythologies and theologies that go back to the Old Kingdom (2700 B.C.), there was Nun, the primordial ocean in which germs of all things floated. Nun was chaos or formless mass that had no structure. In short, Nun was "unorganized chaos, nothingness" (Moret 1972: 374). It was also a lake of chaos and darkness (Grimal 1992: 265). By an effort of his will, Atum "stood up out of Nun and rose above the water; thereupon the Sun came into being, the *Light* was, and Atum, duplicated and made external to the primordial Water, took the name of Ra" (Moret 1972: 374, italics are added). The sun god Ra, then, became visible after being invisible. Although the sun emerged from the chaos, its origin was not known. It came into being out of itself. "The unique deity was not the *visible* sun which has always existed. It was omnipresent, and the entire earth lived, rejoiced and flourished in its *light*" (Sourouzian 1987: 28 f., italics are added). The visible entity or the sun is a marked figure compared to the invisible reality which is the unmarked ground. The marked term conveys a more narrowly specified and delimited conceptual item than the unmarked (Waugh 1982: 301).

2 According to Sahlins' account (1981: 7, 67 f.) the Hawaiians' ritual reception of the British navigator, Captain Cook, in 1779 as their returned God, Lono, is a reproduction of their cultural structure. For further discussion of the significance of Captain Cook who was treated by Hawaiians as their returned God and how and for what reasons they ritually murdered him see Sahlins (1981: 22-28; 1985: 106-109).

3 See, for example, Sahlins 1985, Barnes 1985, Traube 1989, el-Aswad 1987, 1988, 1993, 1994a, 1994b, 1996a, 1996b, and Lyle 1990, 1991, 1995.

The invisible reality was emphasized through various significant mythological events. Of these events, to give one example, one finds that Isis, the granddaughter of the sun god Ra, tirelessly plans many times with many tricks to obtain or steal the real and hidden name in which the secret of the power of that god resides. In this context, the secret of Ra's power is derived from or depends on his invisible or hidden name. Moreover, the god Ra manifests himself in multiple visible forms, symbols, and iconic images. He appears as "a falcon or a ram or in anthropomorphic form with the falcon's or a ram's head, and so forth. These are all merely *visible* effigies, conceived as hieroglyphs, intended to allow recognition throughout his numerous characteristics and attributes" (Sourouzian 1987: 26, italics are added).

Besides the polarity visible/invisible, there are other sets of opposites: light/darkness and heat/cold. Degrees of visibility as well as of light and heat were connected to the movements of the sun whose different names and forms indicate a spectrum of light and heat. Atum means the sun in the evening twilight or "he who is not" during the night. Another name of the sun god is Khepri, meaning "he who becomes," describing the aspect of the rising sun. Khepri is related to the verb *kheper* which means "to come into being" as well as to the word *kheperer* which refers to the scarab beetle. The name Ra means "the sun reigning in the zenith" (Moret 1972: 370).

As a representative of order, Ra conquered chaos through the creation of the universe. After the creation was completed, all chaotic factors and negative forces retreated to the marginal borders of the ordered universe (Grimal 1992: 41). This implies the opposite order/disorder in which the first term, order, encompasses the second.

Having no female partner or wife, the demiurge Ra created out of himself "a divine pair of offspring." One was male called Shu (air), lord of dryness, and the other was female known as Tefnet, goddess of humidity or moisture. Then, out of light (or heat), came the opposite dryness/humidity or wetness, associated with the opposite male/female. Shu was represented as a man crowned with a feather, while Tefnet, a woman or lioness.

Another divine couple was born from the union of the "dry" (Shu) and the "humid" (Tefnet). This couple was the male deity Geb (earth) and goddess Nut (sky). Nut was represented as a woman stretching her naked body over the earth. The lord Shu (air) holds Nut (the sky) up separating her (it) from her husband Geb (earth). Geb appears as a recumbent man hoisting himself up on one

elbow and binding a knee. The mountains known as "Risings of Geb" were formed from his petrified position (Moret 1972: 370). Geb stands for hardness, solidness, and cohesion, while Nut stands for softness, tenderness where she was represented as a beautiful binding woman adorned with stars. Earth and sky, then, imply the opposition hardness/softness associated with man/woman or husband/wife. Geb, the earth god, enjoyed a high prestige as being the father of humanity (Grimal 1992: 47).⁴ Also, Nut, the sky, enjoyed a high position as being high or above as well as being a dwelling place of the sun, the highest cosmic god.

From the union of the earth and sky, four deities, opposed in pairs, were born. Osiris and Isis, and Seth and Nephthys. These deities were integrated in the Great Ennead of Heliopolis, however, they form what can be labeled social cosmology that will be discussed in detail soon. The transition

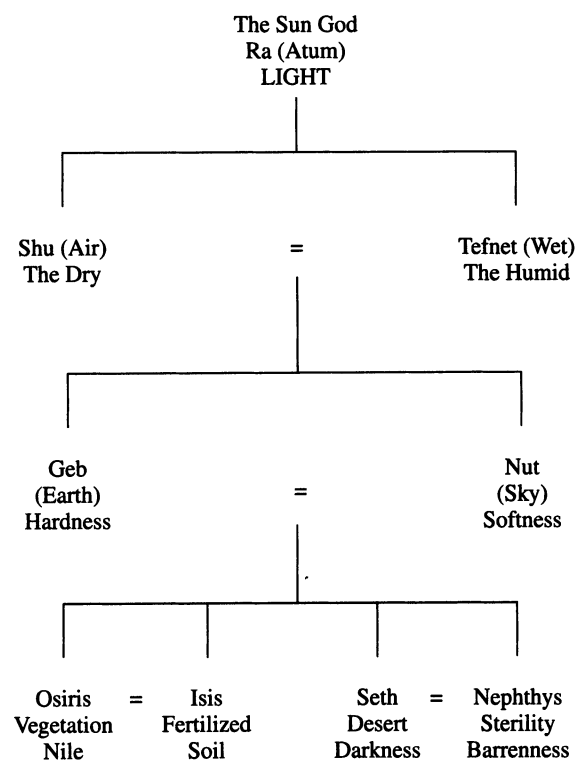


Fig. 1: Divine genealogy and related constituents and principles of Egyptian cosmogony.

⁴ Diodorus Siculus mentioned that Shu and Geb played the roles of Kronos and Zeus, respectively. This statement implies that Geb, like Zeus, was the father of humankind (Grimal 1992: 217).

between the creation of the earth and the rule of men was mythologically made explicit through Osirian religion. Osiris was "the first sovereign on earth after the departure of the gods for heavens" (Sourouzian 1987: 27) and was a god involved in human affairs.

The last four deities, opposed in pairs, symbolize specific natural characteristics of the universe or cosmos. Osiris was associated with the fertilization of the Nile as well as with the force of vegetation, while his sister and wife, Isis, was associated with the fertilized soil, in which seeds grew and flourished. Meanwhile, as opposed to Osiris, Seth symbolizes the dry desert while his wife Nephthys represents barrenness (see Fig. 1). Seth appears in animal form as an anteater or a sharp nosed oxyrhynchus fish or greyhound (Moret 1972: 68, 251). Although the Nile was anthropomorphically represented as the god Hapi, the fertility of the soil of the Nile after the inundation was associated with the fertile force of Osiris (Moret 1972: 82; Frazer 1987: 440 f.).

The Social Cosmology

The structure has an internal diachrony, consisting in the changing relations between general categories (Sahlins 1985: xv). The relations between cosmic gods that formed the Great Ennead changed. The changing relations resulted in a transformation from cosmogony or natural cosmology into social or human cosmology. This transformation is connected with Osirian mythology in which Osiris as a socially significant god became the most dominant cosmic and social figure in Egyptian cosmology.

Osiris was the son of the gods Geb (earth) and Nut (sky). After he established justice and welfare in Egypt, he was ritually killed by his brother Seth and his followers. Osiris' body was cut into pieces and thrown into the sea. Osiris, with the help of his sister-wife Isis and the god Geb, was resurrected or raised and became the god and judge of the dead in the afterworld. Miraculously, Isis transformed herself into a bird and had sexual relations with Osiris resulting in the birth of Horus. Horus overcame and killed Seth and restored his father's position as the king of the living (Budge 1973/I: 2–20; Clark 1978: 100–122). Here, cosmology is anthropomorphic in principle and structure.

Osirian mythology represents a significant transformation of Egyptian archaic natural cosmology in the sense that it reconstructs the elements

of that cosmology into a new form of social cosmology that is crystallized around ethical and social problems. These problems are expressed in the myth through hierarchically ordered sets of opposition. These oppositions are love/hate, peace/war (or fighting), prosperity/poverty, honesty/deceit, immortality/mortality and light/darkness. The first term of each of these sets of opposites is valued more and hence encompasses the second term. Osiris represents love, peace, prosperity, honesty, immortality, and light,⁵ while Seth stands for the opposite of these values. Seth is not a light god, but rather represents both physical and moral night or darkness. He was fighting against Osiris, the beneficent god of light (Moret 1972: 68 f.). Osiris was justified by the tribunal and became god of the dead and lord of eternity, while Seth was condemned for his immoral action.

The myth also contains other sets of oppositions: unity/disunity, collectivity/individuality, passion/lack of passion (dispassion), mercy/cruelty. Moral and social relationships are more highly valued than blood relationships. The myth shows how Isis (sister-wife of Osiris), Nephthys (sister-wife of Seth) and later Horus were united together against Seth. Gods show mercy toward Osiris and devalue Seth for his dispassion and cruelty. Moreover, Seth was alone, isolated, and deserted from even his closest relation, Nephthys. Meanwhile, Osiris and Horus had become two aspects or faces of the same identity.

Sociologically, as husband and wife, Osiris and Isis represented two opposite yet complementary roles and features in real or normal and mythical or narrative contexts. Before death or within the context of the normal life Osiris was shown as a benevolent king or ruler who protected his family and country. He was so active and powerful that he could lead his country to prosperity. Moreover, Osiris was presented as a dominant, independent, and self-confident person who never thought that he would be betrayed by one of his relatives or subjects. During Osiris' life Isis was presented as accepting her role as a wife inside the kingdom of her husband. She did not have an active or leading role. However, after the death of the husband the mythical reality gives us a different picture in which the roles of husband and wife are reversed. Isis took the roles of her husband as defender and protector of her family. She was shown as a powerful and dominant person in supporting her husband who, in turn, was presented as powerless,

⁵ The fact that Osiris was identified with light will be addressed soon.

inactive, dependent, and vulnerable. Symbolically, Isis was associated with the outside domain where she transformed herself into a bird and, then, regained her character and lived in the wilderness raising her son Horus (see Table 1).

Table 1: Reversed Roles and Features Related to Men and Women as Represented in Real and Mythical Contexts

Context	Men as represented by Osiris	Women as represented by Isis
Normal-Daily Life	outside	inside
	active	inactive
	leadership	dependence
	powerful/protector	powerless/protected
Mythical-Death Reality	inside	outside
	inactive	active
	dependence	leadership
	powerless/protected	powerful/protector

Osirian mythology had a great impact on political, intellectual, and social domains of ancient Egyptian society. It also founded the funeral rituals that developed from being exclusively restricted to Egyptian elites, especially kings or pharaohs, during the 3rd and 4th dynasties (Old Kingdom) to being shared and practiced by all Egyptians without discrimination at the end of the Old Kingdom. In the Old Kingdom, Osirian burial rituals were confined to kings. The king or pharaoh stands for the whole society. After death, the pharaoh's royal corpse had to be reanimated, mummified, and preserved to last forever or to ensure eternity. The dismemberment of Osiris' body had become the starting point of the ritual of resurrection. The dead pharaoh was identified with Osiris. The destiny of the whole country was bound up with the fate of the king in his struggle against death and annihilation. If the dead king was assimilated with Osiris, the living king was associated with, or he was, Horus. In this early period of Egyptian history of Egyptian society, the sun god Ra and Osiris became dominant cosmic gods and were adopted by pharaohs as patrons. The living king was both the son of Ra and Horus (son of Osiris). Osiris himself was made sun god, Ra (Moret 1972: 168). Osirian cult and solar doctrine are fused together where "Ra and Osiris function as both the visible diurnal sun and the nocturnal sun which illuminates the darkness" (Sourouzian 1987: 26). The dead

king became Ra in the 6th dynasty without losing his identity as Osiris. Therefore, in the person of "the King Osiris ascends to heaven and shares the dominion with Ra" (Moret 1972: 168).

The cosmos or universe is structured through the combination of opposed yet complementary elements or characteristics, each incomplete in itself or without the other. Any opposition is an opposition of choices among unequals. This means that oppositions are relations and not just things. Oppositions define the conceptual elements or concepts of the system through the relational and hierarchical network they produce (Vaugh 1982: 315). The association of the god sun Ra with life as well as with light or visibility does not imply that Osiris is associated only with death and invisibility. After death, Osiris removed from earth to the sky. He was the first who passed from the gods of the earth to the gods of heaven. On his ascendance to heaven, he underwent a "spiritualization" where he became a soul, a spirit (Moret 1972: 383). He was also resurrected and had the power of spiritual light or enlightenment. The god sun or Ra is related to the natural life of this worldly universe, while Osiris is connected to the social and spiritual life of both this worldly universe and the other world. The judgment of the dead people in the afterlife is based on their deeds in this life (see Table 2).

Table 2: Main Characteristics and Features Associated with Ra and Osiris

Ra	Osiris
creation	meaning
natural order	social-natural order
this life	both this and other lives
light-sun	light-spirit
visible	invisible and visible

In the universe, east and west, south and north, day and night, and life and death are associated respectively with Ra and Osiris. These qualities, however, are complementary and represent different aspects of the same entity. Ra is associated with east or eastern side of the sky from which the sun rises while Osiris is connected with the west and is known as a god who resides over the westerners, or the dead (Moret 1972: 247). In 9th and 10th centuries (2350 B.C.) and after the democratic revolution Ra was associated with Osiris. Mythical and theological doctrines were symbolically presented in the architecture of Theban temple. In a word, the temple reflects the

whole universe. The temple runs from east to west, following the course of the sun. As the real sun divides the sky, the pharaoh or god divides the temple into two regions. On the one hand, there is the eastern side connected to the south of the temple and the sky which is the realm of rising sun or the god Ra, the god of life. On the other hand, there is the western side attached to the north which is the sphere of the sinking sun, of the Osiris or the god of the dead (Moret 1972: 415–421).

The invisible quality as the underlying principle or theme was repeatedly stressed. In official doctrines of the 12th dynasty, Osiris is “the soul of Ra, his great hidden Name which resides in him” (Moret 1972: 385). The name of Osiris was enough to turn a dead man into a god (Moret 1972: 260). One might ask if this explain Isis’ successful attempt to obtain Ra’s sacred and hidden name? And that name, one speculates, might have been that of “Osiris” who became Isis’ husband. This speculation can be considered reasonable within the context or given the fact that both Osiris and Isis were the most dominant deities in ancient Egyptian religion and cosmology.

Osirian cosmology developed further in the Middle Kingdom (and New Kingdom), and the Osirian burial rituals became available and accessible to all people without being restricted to the royal and privileged families. At this period of time (history), the religious and intellectual center moved from Heliopolis to two cities, one in lower Egypt known as Busiris, where Osiris’ backbone was buried, the other in upper Egypt, known as Abydos, the burial place of Osiris’ head (Frazer 1987: 426; Moret 1972: 246). Osirian doctrine or cosmology spread over all Egypt binding all classes of that society. The cohesion of the members

of a society “is not so much due to their similarity (mechanical solidarity) or to their complementarity (organic solidarity) as to their common submission to the ruling power” (Sahlins 1985: 45) that controls them in this life as well as in the other life.

Osirian cosmology enjoyed a certain precedence compared to the cosmology of Ra. This statement can be substantiated by comparing both cosmologies with each other. First, Ra cosmology deals directly with the problem of creation of the universe as well as with the constituents of that universe and principles upon which it is constructed. Osirian cosmology deals with social, moral, and political problems as well as with the destiny of man in both this life and the afterlife. In short, it deals with the problem of “meaning” in Weberian terminology, i.e., meaning related to life and death and complicated social relationships.

Second, Ra resides in the heights of heaven, attached not to people’s everyday life, but rather with creation and destiny of the universe. On the contrary, Osiris lives on earth among people, ruling them and organizing their lives. Ordinary as well as privileged people were interested more in practical issues such as fighting for, and achieving certain objectives, maintaining justice, and performing death rituals including mummification.

Third, Ra doctrine or cosmology is confined to the living world or universe whereas Osirian cosmology goes beyond that living world to include the domain of the afterworld that attracted Egyptians who showed a great concern of the their afterlife or eternal world.

Fourth, as a man or god who lived on earth, died, resurrected, and then ascended to heaven, Osiris encompassed earth and heaven as well as

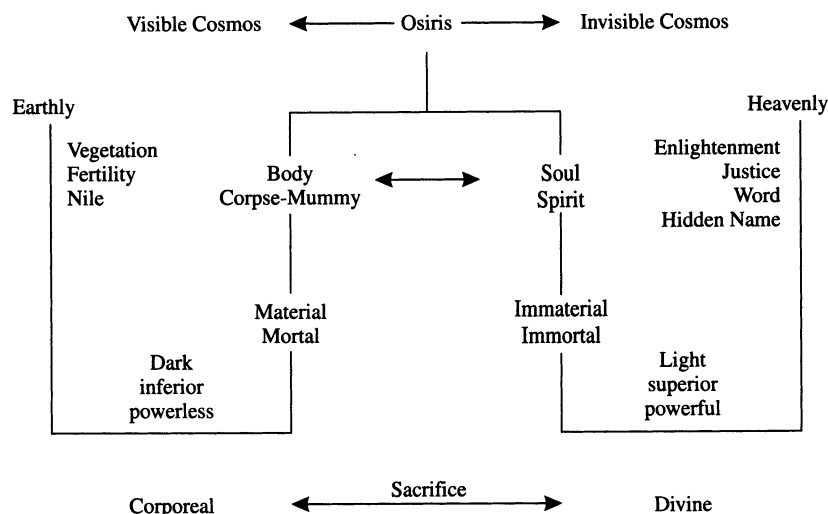


Fig. 2: The visible and the invisible aspects of the cosmos and the related features showing the encompassment of Osiris of the whole universe or cosmos.

this worldly life and otherworldly life. He also encompasses the visible and invisible aspects of the universe while Ra does not have that privilege. In a word, he is associated with death and encompasses the contrary or life. At once encompassing and transcending the society, Osiris is capable of dominating that society and the universe as well, in its multiple spheres, visible and invisible, this life and the other life (see Fig. 2).

Mythical Realities and Cosmological Metaphors

Specific aspects of Osirian mythology have been compared with those of Christianity by scholars such as Budge (1969, 1973, 1974), Creed (1942), Clark (1978), Brandon (1969), Frazer (1987), and Jung (1968) among others. The similarity between Osirian cults and Christianity might be a product of the Christian cultural lens through which Egyptian religion was interpreted in colonial and postcolonial times. Whatever the motive of these studies, they have been limited to surface analogy and have suffered from the lack of systematic approach that aims at exploring the relationships between underlying principles upon which structures of Osirian and Christian cosmologies are built. Comparability cannot be made on external or surface homology, but rather on internal or deep relationships between basic components of the structure (Hendricks 1982: 140).

This paper does not claim that Christian religion, however, is a duplicate of Osirian mythology, but rather confirms some significant underlying principles of both types of cosmologies. In other words, it attempts to reveal the principles by which the striking homology between Osirian and Christian cosmologies can be rendered intelligible. Here, to support the objective of this part of the paper I quote Sahlins (1985: 76) who says "I do not offer a competing historical theory, since it should be clear that I am not talking about what 'actually happened.' Yet, what I am talking about – indigenous schemes of cosmological proportions – may be even more significant historically."

It has been said that "between the Old Empire and the advent of Islam, Egypt received only two major influences from without – Hellenism and Christianity" (Nock 1944: 21). It can be argued that this influence could not have existed or might have taken a very different form if there were not already a similar preexisting religious system in Egypt upon the advent of Christianity.

It can be theorized that two significant historical events facilitated the rapid acceptance and practice of Christianity in Egypt. The first event happened in A.D. 48 when St. Mark the evangelist visited Alexandria and stayed four years preaching the principles and ideas of the new religion to Egyptian followers (Atiya 1968: 25, 27).⁶ During that time, St. Mark established the Christian (Coptic) church in Alexandria (Homersham 1892: 161). He returned to Jerusalem after ordaining Anianus (a shoemaker and first Egyptian convert), bishop of the first church (Fowler 1901: 3). The second event was the ritual death of St. Mark in Alexandria in A.D. 68 (Atiya 1968: 27) which will be discussed subsequently.

To begin, one might ask why Alexandria was a stage from which Christianity spread quickly. "No country" Creed (1942: 300) says "has affected the development of the Christian religion more than has Egypt, or rather – to speak more exactly – no city has affected the development of the Christian religion more profoundly than has Alexandria." In Egypt and throughout the Ptolemaic and Roman periods, Alexandria was a vital center of intellectual, political, and economic activities. In the first century A.D., it was second only to Rome in political importance, but greater in its commercial prosperity and intellectual or educational progress (Homersham 1892: 161; Fowler 1901: 2). When St. Mark came to Alexandria, the dominant religion was that of Osiris, known then as Serapis. Ptolemy I (305–282 B.C.) had made Osiris, under the name of Serapis, a universal state god whom both Greeks and Egyptians could worship (Brandon 1969: 132) and had built a great temple to Serapis in Alexandria. When Egypt later became a part of the Roman Empire in 30 B.C., the god Serapis (Osiris) was being worshipped.

It must be mentioned that during the period between A.D. 48 and 68 (or between the first visit of St. Mark to Alexandria and his death in 68), there were no historically recorded events of violence or discord between Egyptian Christians and followers of the god Serapis (Osiris). On his second visit to Alexandria in A.D. 68, St. Mark "was overjoyed to find that the brethren had so multiplied that they were able to build a considerable church in the suburban district of

6 Concerning the exact date or year of the first visit of St. Mark to Alexandria, historians have different opinions. Some authorities say that it was A.D. 40 (Fowler 1901: 2), A.D. 45 (Butcher 1975: 20), or A.D. 48 (Atiya 1968: 27). Atiya mentions that some other sources state that the year was A.D. 55, 58, or 61 (1968: 27).

Baucalis" (Atiya 1968: 27). The question here is what were the factors which facilitated the rapid spread of Christianity in Alexandria, and then over all Egypt?

This question can be answered by referring to the basic symbolic structures of both the Christian and Osirian (Serapis) religions. In this case, the attention will be paid to the structural relationships between concepts, symbols, images, and rituals of each religion. The foremost impression or conclusion one might have after examining the ideas and rituals of both the Osirian myth and Christian religion is that they are similar in many respects. "The resemblance need not be purely accidental. Ancient Egypt may have contributed its share to the gorgeous symbolism of the Catholic Church as well as to the pale abstractions of her theology" (Frazer 1987: 445). Basic concepts, images, and rituals of both religions include: God as father and God as son, the Holy Mother and divine son, the savior who saves and people who need to be saved, sufferings, holy spirit, trinity, baptism, resurrection, and judgment. In both religions, one might say, concepts and rituals can be understood in their relational contexts. No concept can be understood separately or without relation to other concepts. As Sahlins says (1981: 71), "God the Father is understood by relation to God the Son, and vice versa." The relationships between concepts in both Osirian and Christian systems are strikingly similar. To see the like is to see the same in spite of, and through, the different. This tension between sameness and difference characterizes the logical structure of likeness (Ricoeur 1978: 5).

The Encompassing Father, The God-Man

The archaic or traditional man, Mircea Eliade (1959: 5) argues, "acknowledges no act which has not been previously posited and lived by someone else." The myth of Osiris was a paradigm of familial or kinship relationship, social values, political relation, suffering, eternal return, justice, and interaction between God and man as well as between men and women. Egyptian concepts of kinship and descent explain the continuity and repetition of their social and cultural structure.

The relationship between father and son and vice versa, on the one hand, and between mother and son and vice versa, on the other, reflect the most significant social, familial, religious, and political principles that ordered Egyptian society. These categories of person, represented in their myth, were divine entities that made kinship relationships and

the family, in which father is the most dominant and encompassing figure, an unquestionable reality. In other words these categories of the person had become historical metaphors that succeeded in linking the secular and transcendental realities together. One of the hymns addressed to Osiris says "Thou art the father and mother of mankind, they live on thy breath, they subsist on the flesh of thy body" (Frazer 1987: 442).

Hierarchy is universal and the order is viewed to constitute mainly in inequality (Dumont 1986: 265 f.). The belief in the encompassing "Father" either in both Osirian mythology and Christian religion constitutes, borrowing Rappaport's phrase (1979: 210), "ultimate sacred postulates." In their nature, sacred postulates are "neither verifiable nor falsifiable but nevertheless taken to be unquestionable because mystically known or because ritually accepted" (Rappaport 1979: 129). Analogous relationships were and still are core principles of Christianity. For Christianity, God is the "Father, the Almighty, the Creator. Because he is Father, the self finds itself within a universal structure of kinship. Because he is the Almighty, nothing can finally threaten the fulfillment of God's familial design" ... "No matter how different or even irreconcilable various Christian theologies may appear, they all finally display a common identity derived from the shared root metaphor of the fatherhood of God. This is not one divine attribute among many, but a principle for the interpretation of them all" (Harned 1981: 28 f.).

Osiris was a god in human form. One of the Egyptian religion's fundamental characteristics common with Christianity is "the reality of a God who is in man and above man" (Morenz 1973: 2). The "Christian era itself owes its name and significance to the antique mystery of the god-man, which has its roots in the archetypical Osiris-Horus myth of ancient Egypt" (Jung 1968: 68 f.). As Ortner (1984: 148) states "society and history are not simply sums of ad hoc responses and adaptations to particular stimuli, but are governed by organizational and evaluative schemes. It is these (embodied, of course, within institutional, symbolic, and material forms) that constitute the system." The event thus "enters culture as an instance of a received category, the worldly token of a presupposed type" (Sahlins 1981: 7). Like Christ, Osiris lived on earth among men and was involved in the social affairs of their daily life without losing his transcendental quality. When he was born, "a voice proclaimed that the Lord of all things had come upon the earth" (Moret 1912: 70 f.).

Suffering and Sacrifice

"Mythical incidents constitute archetypical situations. The experiences of celebrated mythical protagonists are re-experienced by the living in analogous circumstances. More, the living *become* mythical heroes" (J. Prytz Johansen quoted in Sahlins 1981: 14, italics are in the original).

Osiris was the representation of sufferings. He was betrayed, denied, and slaughtered by his closest relative, his brother Seth. It is debatable then the statement which Eliade emphasizes concerning the superiority of Christianity compared with the old Mediterranean ethics. The reason of that superiority as Eliade claims was that Christianity "gave value to suffering: transforming pain from a negative condition to an experience with a positive spiritual content" (Eliade 1959: 96). Osirian cosmology gives a high value to suffering and Osiris himself was a model for those who suffered. In ancient texts one reads, "the heart of Osiris is in every sacrifice," and "Osiris knows the day when he shall pass out" (Moret 1912: 98). Osiris was "the bread of life" (Moret 1912: 104) as well as "past and future-cause and potentiality" (Clark 1978: 157). In Osirian religion every person identified himself with Osiris, especially the deceased who "would become like unto Osiris in every respect" (Budge 1974: lxxx, 416–418). Similarly, in Christianity every "Christian is to become a little Christ (Lewis 1971: 153). In addition, Osiris was the savior god who, by his death and resurrection, assured his devotees a new life after death (Moret 1912: 138). When Osirian religion disappeared, "it was succeeded by the religion of Christ, the new savior god, who had also died and rose to life again" (Brandon 1969: 132).

Afterlife and Judgment

The belief in the afterlife was the fundamental reason that drove Egyptians to preserve the bodies of their dead by the highly sophisticated art of embalming and mummification that "continued in Egypt for some centuries after the introduction of Christianity into that country, in fact until the doctrine preached by Saint Anthony became known. This great ascetic taught men to believe that Christ would at the Resurrection, give them back their bodies in a glorified state and that therefore mummification was unnecessary for the genesis of the spiritual body" (Budge 1973: 134 f.).

The last judgment is a basic concern in both Christian and Osirian religions. Christ will be the

judge in the last judgment (Brandon 1969: 382). Osiris also was the judge in the last judgment of the afterworld (Brandon 1969: 102). He was the "Ruler of Eternity" (Wilson 1956: 269). The judgment of each individual seemed to occur after his death where his or her heart was weighed in front of Osiris, the sole judge of the dead. The dead were blessed or punished according to their actions in the worldly life (Budge 1974: 21–25).

Trinity

The concept of the trinity is not exclusive to Christianity. Before the advent of Christianity, Egypt knew trinity, implying the religious belief that three gods are one, in many different forms.⁷ A well known example of this was "the union of Ptah, Sokaris, and Osiris. Sokaris, who was a local god at Memphis, was associated with Ptah, who was powerful there but whose influence was also nationwide; through his function as god of the dead, he was associated with Osiris, who was supreme in such matters" (Morenz 1973: 142). Historical records mention that there were two statements which served to enhance the nature of the god Apis, the God of Memphis, by making two deities take up their abode in him. These statements demonstrate that the three gods are one (Morenz 1973: 143). Another example goes back to Ramesside period (1308–1085 BC) where trinity was represented in the god Apis. Three gods were united in that god. These gods were Osiris=Apis (a single quantity) – Atum-Horus at the same time ..., the Great God (Morenz 1973: 143).⁸

The Holy Spirit is a fundamental component of the Christian Trinity. The notion of Holy Spirit was also recognized in Osirian mythology.⁹ The god Osiris was represented in the form of a bird and was believed to descend from heavenly heights to settle upon his temple so as to unite

7 For further information on the theme of trinity in ancient Egyptian religion see Morenz (1973: 142–146).

8 Compare this statement with the Leyden hymns to Amon which run as follows: "All gods are three, Amon, Re, and Ptah, and there is no second to them. Hidden (*imn*) is his name as Amon, he is Re in face, and his body is Ptah" (Morenz 1973: 144, italics in the original).

9 The theme of the bird as a symbol associated with the vital force of life is also shown when Isis, the divine female, transformed herself into a bird and miraculously made love with her dead husband Osiris. The soul symbolizing the vital and eternal force of life was represented in the form of a human headed bird (Budge 1974: 285–294; Clark 1978: 253–256).

with his image. In Osirian mythology the bird is a symbol of life or spirit, while in Christianity the dove is a symbol of Holy Spirit (Liungman 1991: 126). Osiris "appears as a spirit ... to join his form in his sanctuary. He comes flying out of the heavens like a sparrow-hawk with glittering plumage" (Morenz 1973: 144). The spirit of God "represents its divine substance and vitality, which it imparts to the image yet on the other hand it denotes precisely inferior earthly creatures and raises them to the level of forms of the sublime God" (Morenz 1973: 152).

The Divine Mother and the Encompassing Son

The root metaphors of sacred motherhood and divine childhood are represented in Isis and Horus respectively. These metaphors have been represented in similar fashions in history. The "early representation of a Coptic Madonna is a true *reproduction* of Isis suckling the baby Horus" (Atiya 1968: 2, italics are added). Horus, however, was seen by Egyptians as the representation of his father Osiris. Horus was an encompassing god who came to guide and control people in their worldly life, while his father was their judge in the afterlife. As Budge (1973: 306) points out, the bulk of the masses in Egypt who "professed Christianity transferred to Mary the Virgin the attributes of Isis the Everlasting Mother, and to the Babe Jesus those of the Horus."

In this context, it might be useful to refer to a picture in a gallery in London which represents a procession of Egyptian gods to see how myth and history are mixed together in one unit. In this picture, Butcher says, "the singers go before, the minstrels follow after; in the midst there are the damsels playing on the timbrels; *and in the place of superest honour is borne the goddess, Isis, with Horus upon her knee*. The sick are brought by their friends to the wayside to receive strength and healing as the gods pass.^[10] Little images of them are sold as charms to ward off evil from the purchaser. But in the center of the canvas a very humble cavalcade meets ... *bearing a woman and child* ... Those ancient gods are lost and forgotten, but the child's name is honoured now in every

quarter of the globe: Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the World" (1975: 12, italics are added). And "Isis's devotees passed quietly to the worship of another Mother" (Marlowe 1971: 60). Certainly in art "the figure of Isis suckling the infant Horus is so like that of the Madonna and child that it has sometimes received the adoration of ignorant Christians" (Frazer 1987: 445).

Baptism

Concerning the ritual of baptism, which is also essential in Christianity, one finds that it was observed and performed in Osirian religion. In ancient Egypt, an infant would be baptized to cleanse his body and his soul. The water "makes of him what it makes of every ... Egyptian who receives the rite, the equal to Osiris" (Moret 1912: 181 f.). The ritual of baptism symbolized death and life where the child was supposed to die and to be born again into life, like the god Osiris (Moret 1912: 182). In Christianity as well, and in the ritual of baptism, the infant is ritually assimilated to Christ in his death so as to be one with him in his resurrection (Brandon 1969: 320). The symbolic significance of baptism in both religions, then, is that it signifies the meaningful relationship between death and life or men and God.

The Cross, Symbol of Life, Rebirth, and Eternity

Another striking fact that emphasizes the similarity between Christianity and Osirian religions is the use of the symbol of the cross. In Christianity, the cross symbolizes Christ's pains and sufferings through which humankind is redeemed and granted eternal life. The Christian cross has been recognized as being a reproduction of, the *ankh* (Clark 1978: 258), an ancient Egyptian symbol of life. As some writers maintain "the ankh sign was cruciform with a rounded top which the Christians readily adopted from the earliest time" (Atiya 1968: 21; Liungman 1991: 46, 438). The *ankh* was "the key of Eternal life that opens up the gates of death on to immortality" (Cirlot 1971: 68-72, 167). Egyptian Christians (Copts) took the *ankh* as a symbol of eternal life through the sacrificial death of Christ; it "appears on gravestones of the sixth through ninth centuries" (Biedermann 1992: 83). The cross and *ankh* were so similar that both Egyptian Christians and followers of Osiris/Serapis used them in common. When the temple of

10 Miracles were attributed to Isis who "was in her capacity as goddess of wisdom and as mystic healer of the blind and the ailing that she was revered throughout the Greco-Roman world and that her influence on both Judaism of the postexilic period and nascent Christianity is most readily apparent" (Kee 1980: 145).

Serapis was broken down in A.D. 395, "there was found in it, engraven on stones, certain characters, which they called hieroglyphics, having the form of crosses. Both the Christians and pagans, on seeing them, thought they had reference to their respective religions; for the Christians who affirm that the cross is the sign of Christ's saving passion, claimed this character was peculiarly theirs, but the pagans alleged that it might appertain to Christ and Serapis in common" (Butcher 1975: 219).

Alexandrians prostrated themselves before Serapis (Osiris) or Christ impartially during the first century and the first half of the second century (Meinardus 1965: 112 f.). The similarity between the two religions was strong enough to produce an ambiguous state shared by both Egyptian natives and outsiders. For example, when the Roman emperor Hadrian visited Egypt, he wrote a letter to the consul Servians in A.D. 134 saying, "they who worship Serapis are Christians, and some who call themselves Bishops of Christ are devoted to Serapis ... the very Patriarch himself, when he came into Egypt, is maintained by some to have worshipped Serapis, by others Christ" (Fowler 1901: 7).

A Ritual Death

It has been mentioned that for almost 20 years (A.D. 48 to 68) – the period between St. Mark's two visits to Alexandria – no violence or hostility between the believers of the old and new religions was recorded in history. However, on the second visit of St. Mark to Alexandria in A.D. 68, an event occurred. By this event, it is meant the ritual death of St. Mark which happened on a day in which both Christians and the followers of Osirian religion were celebrating, separately, some religious festivals. In the year A.D. 68, it happened that Easter fell on the same day as the Serapis festival. The followers of Serapis (Osiris) were celebrating the Serapis festival in the Serapion. At the same time, Christians were celebrating Easter. No reference in historical records regarding the motives or causes that drove believers of Serapis to punish and kill St. Mark (Butcher 1975: 23). However, according to historical records, "St. Mark was seized, dragged with a rope around his neck in the street, and then incarcerated for the night. In the following morning the same ordeal was repeated until he gave up the ghost" (Atiya 1968: 27). The corpse of St. Mark was buried in the church of Baucalia in Alexandria. And for many centuries, the election of the Alexandrian patriarchs took

place at his tomb (Butcher 1975: 23). "The co-existence of naïve mythology among the masses and a sophisticated theology among an elite of theoreticians, *both* serving to maintain the same symbolic universe, is a frequent historical phenomenon" (Berger and Luckman 1967: 112, italics in the original).

The death of St. Mark, which implied notions of suffering and sacrifice, might be thought of as a critical historical event which motivated the followers of the new religion to distinguish themselves from others and to declare themselves as unique believers of the Savior God (Christ) despite the fact that both religions conveyed one message or meaning: salvation in otherworldly life based on morally and socially guided behavior in this worldly life.

Conclusion

This study has attempted to demonstrate that hierarchically opposed relationships between elements and concepts which form the cosmological system of ancient Egypt explain stable and changing qualities of that system. Archaic Egyptian cosmology is culturally ordered and historically transformed. Historical transformation, however, is understood in terms of diachronic relationships between elements of the cosmological belief system. In other words, the mythical cosmology as a set of hierarchical relationships between concepts or categories is characterized by its internal diachrony that is based on the changing relation between its concepts. Within this theoretical context, archaic Egyptian cosmology had been developed and transformed from a natural system concerned with the problem of the creation of the world into a social cosmology that deals with human problems related to the meaning of this life as well as to the eternal meaning and destiny of man in the afterlife.

Meanings of cosmological concepts and historical events are realized through the elicitation of hierarchical relationships between oppositions in which specific concepts enjoy a high or distinct value. This paper concludes that for archaic Egyptian cosmology, the polarity of invisible/visible is the principle upon which other polarities or sets of oppositions are built. This conclusion does not support Lyle's statement that the polarity of brightness/darkness is the common ground upon which old-world cosmology is constructed.

Old-world cosmology is inseparable from myth or religion. As a matter of fact, archaic cosmology constituted the core foundation of religion in which

invisible domain formed a sanctified and unquestionable reality. God exists, but is invisible. Yet, he can make himself visible to whom he desires whenever he wishes.

Symbols and images embodied in myth and religion are treaded in this study as a clue revealing human involvement in history as well as an agent in the process of cultural or cosmological transformation.

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